

BORNANA

Leah Shirley: *DANCER* at Sibyl, New Orleans

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Just over the levee, barely visible through the mangled winter foliage lining the banks of the Mississippi River, the sun sets into the horizon line to be engulfed. “You’re lucky,” I’m told in a hushed voice by gallery owner and curator, Katherine Ainsley, as I enter, “you’ve come at the perfect time: the light is just right.”

A celestial collaborator of interdisciplinary artist and astrologer Leah Shirley, the sun and its diurnal course deeply influence how her works of sculpture and lensless photography reveal their texture and capacity for transformation. By harnessing the Sun’s solar energy, Shirley’s solo exhibition, *DANCER*, translates its raw power through alchemical process, play and ritual, bastioned by Audre Lorde’s essay “The Erotic as Power.” Lorde’s essay is a radical reception of creative, primordial and feminine energy. Like sun-gazing, Shirley’s works invites the viewer into a meditative and healing relationship with light through the examination of materials that reflect, refract, and filter such as copper, glass, pearl, and mirror.

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*Kaleidoscope*, for example, a 32 inch circumferential disco ball outfitted in small mirror cut outs of butterflies, relies upon a direct light source. Depending on the time of day, the disco ball, named after the collective noun for a group of butterflies, shifts in its capacity to carry and project light. Reminiscent of a daytime moon, *Kaleidoscope* waxes and wanes in accordance to its orbit. In its fullness, a swarm of glittering butterflies twirl in frantic choreography across the floors and walls of the gallery, bejeweled in lavender-yellow reflective hues. The dance floor has opened and an irradiant garden is revealed, announcing itself and the setting sun— night is coming and with it the winged procession of another Lepidopteran: the crepuscular moth. While many of Shirley’s works radiate pure light, several others such as *Feel Free (Hawk Moth)* and *O.U.D (Luna Moth)* metabolize it, absorbing its energy while inviting in a divine balance. These nocturnal entities alchemize into something numinous, imbued with their own power to exponentially change the makeup of the physical space.



Brightly speckled throughout are a collection of Shirley’s chromatic “colorgrams” and cyanotypes. The cyanotypes, bearing the images of dew covered spider webs, hummingbirds, and numerous articulations of morning glory’s alight ones insectile instincts, pulling the viewer in by the stark contrast of the prints empyreal blues, as if luring one forward to drink sweet nectar from the flutes of each blossom. From an astrological perspective, Shirley correlates the morning glory (*Iopomoea nil*), a vivid florescent five-pointed perennial, to the “Petals of Venus,” a pattern created by the geocentric plotting of Venus’ heliacal relation to the Sun over an eight year cycle, as observed from Earth. The colorgrams themselves are unique in that they utilize the tools and apparatus of darkroom color photography without a negative to capture images of pure light. The results bare strikingly halcyonic colors reminiscent of a mood ring’s clairvoyance.

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Functioning as superlunary garden and provisional dance floor, Shirley's architectures also invoke the nostalgia of youth and the sacredness of the playground. Several works of glass and ceramic mosaic communicate this sense of play and eternal childhood, including the empathetic and stainlessly introspective bouquet of flowers entitled, *Something cute (I don't want to worry about aging)*. Age, our measure of time across the human body as rendered by one's yearly revolution around the sun, freezes in Shirley's universe, refracting against itself like a tunnel of mirrors. In *World Egg*, a piece named after the mythological motif of creation, birth, death and everything in-between collide. Nestled into a black, obsidian like backdrop, the egg, assembled from pearlescent white ceramics, hovers at eye level, imposing itself upon the viewer as if it were a mask. Two red pieces of glass flank the base of the egg: exit and entrance wounds—the blood of life, the blood of death. Born from the egg, in Orphic tradition, *EROS* and *CHAOS*, two swings made of cut glass, grout and steel hang from the gallery mezzanine, independent yet adjacent pendulums. Nearby a mirror, entitled *Discernment*, plainly unmasks its participant, revealing, as is the nature of the Sun in astrology, one's true, essential self.

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*Leah Shirley: DANCER* is on view at Sibyl in New Orleans through March 17, 2024.

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